

Try Feedforward Instead of Feedback

Marshall Goldsmith

Giving and receiving feedback has long been considered to be an essential skill for leaders. As they strive to achieve the goals of the organization, employees need to know how they are doing. They need to know if their performance is what their leaders expect from them and, if not, they need suggestions on how to improve it. Traditionally, this information has been communicated in the form of feedback from leaders to their employees. And leaders themselves need feedback from their employees, in the form of suggestions for how to improve procedures and processes, innovative ideas for new products and services, and input on their own leadership styles.

But there is a fundamental problem with feedback: it focuses on that *past*, on what has already occurred—not on the infinite vari-

ety of things that can be in the future. As such, feedback is limited and it is static.

Over the past several years, I have observed more than five thousand leaders as they participated in a fascinating experiential exercise. In the exercise, participants are each asked to play two roles. In one role, they



are asked to provide *feedforward*—that is, to give someone else suggestions for the future and *help as much as they can*. In the second role, they are asked to accept feedforward—that is, to listen to the

suggestions for the future and learn as much as they can. The exercise typically lasts for ten to fifteen minutes, and the average participant has six or seven dialogue sessions. In the exercise participants are asked to go through the following steps:

- Pick one behavior that they would like to change. *Change in*

this behavior should make a significant, positive difference in their lives.

- Describe this behavior to randomly selected fellow participants. *This is done in one-on-one dialogues. It can be done quite simply, such as, “I want to be a better listener.”*
- Ask for feedforward—for two suggestions for the future that might help achieve a positive change in the selected behavior. *If participants have worked together in the past, they are not allowed to give any feedback about the past. They are only allowed to give ideas for the future.*
- Listen attentively to the suggestions and take notes. *Participants are not allowed to comment on the suggestions in any way. They are not allowed to critique the suggestions or even to make positive judgmental statements, such as, “That’s a good idea.”*
- Thank the other participants for their suggestions.
- Ask the other persons what they would like to change.
- Provide feedforward—two suggestions aimed at helping them change.
- Say, “You are welcome,” when thanked for the suggestions. *The entire process of both giving and receiving feedforward usually takes about two minutes.*
- Find another participant and keep repeating the process until the exercise is stopped.

The term *feedforward* was coined in a discussion I had with Jon Katzenbach, author of *The Wisdom of Teams*, *Real Change Leaders*, and *Peak Performance*.

When the exercise is finished, I ask participants to provide one word that best describes their reaction to this experience. I ask them to complete the sentence, “This exercise was. . . .” The words provided are almost always extremely positive, such as “great,” “energizing,” “useful,” or “helpful.” The most common word mentioned is “fun”!

What is the *last* word that most of us think about when we receive coaching and developmental ideas? Fun!

players are taught to envision the ball going in the hoop and to imagine the perfect shot. By giving people ideas on how they can be even more successful, we can increase their chances of achieving this success in the future.

2. *It can be more productive to help people be right than to prove they were wrong.* Negative feedback often becomes an exercise in “let me prove you were wrong.” This tends to produce defensiveness on the part of the receiver and discomfort on

inconsistent with the way we see ourselves. Successful people tend to have a very positive self-image. I have observed many successful executives respond to (and even enjoy) feedforward. I am not sure that these same people would have had such a positive reaction to feedback.

4. *Feedforward can come from anyone who knows about the task. It does not require personal experience with the individual.* One very common positive reaction to the feedforward exercise is that participants are amazed by how much they can learn from people they don’t know! For example, if you want to be a better listener, almost any fellow leader can give you ideas on how you can improve. They don’t have to know you. Feedback requires knowing about the person. Feedforward just requires having good ideas for achieving the task.

5. *People do not take feedforward as personally as feedback.* In theory, constructive feedback is supposed to focus on the performance, not the person. In practice, almost all feedback is taken personally (no matter how it is delivered). Successful people’s sense of identity is highly connected with their work. The more successful people are, the more this tends to be true. It is hard to give a dedicated professional feedback that is not taken

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Ten Reasons to Try Feedforward

When participants are asked why this exercise is seen as fun and helpful as opposed to painful, embarrassing, or uncomfortable, their answers provide a great explanation of why feedforward can often be more useful than feedback.

1. *We can change the future. We can’t change the past.* Feedforward helps people envision and focus on a positive future, not a failed past. Athletes are often trained using feedforward. Race drivers are taught, “Look at the road, not the wall.” Basketball

the part of the sender. Even constructively delivered feedback is often seen as negative as it necessarily involves a discussion of mistakes, shortfalls, and problems. Feedforward, on the other hand, is almost always seen as positive because it focuses on solutions.

3. *Feedforward is especially suited to successful people.* Successful people like getting ideas that are aimed at helping them achieve their goals. They tend to resist negative judgment. We all tend to accept feedback that is consistent with the way we see ourselves. We also tend to reject or deny feedback that is

personally. Feedforward cannot involve a personal critique, since it is discussing something that has not yet happened!

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6. *Feedback can reinforce personal stereotyping and negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Feedforward can reinforce the possibility of change.* How many of us have been “helped” by a spouse, significant other, or friend who seems to have a near-photographic memory of our previous “sins” that they share with us in order to point out the history of our shortcomings. Negative feedback can be used to reinforce the message, “this is just the way you are.” Feedforward is based on the assumption that people can make positive changes in the future.

7. *Face it! Most of us hate getting negative feedback, and we don’t like to give it.* I have reviewed summary 360-degree feedback reports for over fifty companies. The items “provides developmental feedback in a timely manner” and “encourages and accepts constructive criticism” almost always score near the bot-

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8. *Feedforward can cover almost all of the same material as feedback.* Imagine that you have just made a terrible presentation in front of the executive committee. Your manager is in the room. Rather than make you relive this humiliating experience via a postmortem feedback session, your manager might help you prepare for future presentations by giving you suggestions for the future. These suggestions can be very specific and still delivered in a positive way. In this way your manager can cover the same points without feeling as embarrassed and without making you feel even more humiliated.

9. *Feedforward tends to be much faster and more efficient than feedback.* An excellent technique for giving ideas to successful people is to say, “Here are four ideas for the future. Please accept these in the positive spirit in which they are given. If you can only use two of the ideas, you are still two ahead. Just ignore what doesn’t make sense for you.” With this approach almost no time gets wasted on judging the quality of the ideas or proving that the ideas are wrong. This debate process is usually negative; it can take up a lot of time, and it is often not very productive. By eliminating judgment of the ideas, the process becomes much more positive for the sender as well as the receiver. Successful people tend to have a high need for self-determination and will tend to accept ideas they buy while rejecting ideas that feel forced upon them.

10. *Feedforward can be a useful tool to apply with managers, peers, and team members.* Rightly or wrongly, feedback is associated with judgment. This can lead to very negative unintended consequences when applied to managers or peers. Feedforward does not imply superiority of judgment. It is focused on being offered by a helpful colleague rather than an expert. As such it can be easier to hear from a person who is not in a position of power or authority. An excellent team-building exercise is to

have each team member ask, “How can I better help our team in the future?” and listen to feedforward from fellow team members (in one-on-one dialogues).

that the right message is conveyed, and that those who receive it are receptive to its content. The result is a much more dynamic, much more open organization—one whose

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In summary, feedforward is often preferable to feedback in day-to-day interactions. Of course, this does not mean that leaders should never give feedback or that performance appraisals should be abandoned. Still, aside from its effectiveness and efficiency, feedforward can make life a lot more enjoyable. When managers are asked, “How did you feel the last time you received feedback?” their most common responses are very negative. When managers are asked how they felt after receiving feedforward, they reply that feedforward was not only useful, it was also fun!

Quality communication—between and among people at all levels and every department and division—is the glue that holds organizations together. By using feedforward—and by encouraging others to use it—leaders can dramatically improve the quality of communication in their organizations, ensuring

employees focus on the promise of the future rather than the mistakes of the past.

Marshall Goldsmith is widely recognized as one of the world's foremost authorities in helping successful leaders get even better. He has been listed in Forbes as one of five top executive coaches and in the Wall Street Journal as a “Top 10” executive educator. Marshall is coauthor (with Robert Fulmer) of “The Leadership Investment,” a Choice award winner as an “Academic Business Book of the Year” for 2001. He is an emeritus member of the Drucker Foundation Board.